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DEFENCE OF INDIA

THE

Problem of Nationalization

I.—THE PROBLEM STATED

The National Demand

The general public has been kept familiar with the problem of Indianizing the army mainly through the discussion of three concrete proposals. The first of these is to make the commissioned ranks of the army Indian, the second to replace the British regiments in India by purely Indian units, and the third to transfer the control of army affairs to an Indian minister. Of these the first is by far the oldest demand, for it was first discussed as a practical proposition in 1885. From that date till 1914, public opinion generally and the Indian National Congress in particular repeatedly insisted on the change, without however any result. Then came the war and with it an immense strengthening of the Indian case through India's whole-hearted co-operation with Great Britain and the fine record of Indian soldiers. As a result, the Government introduced the principle of Indianization just after the war, and some qualified Indians were given commissions in the army. This was followed by a more

systematic scheme to Indianize eight selected units of the Indian army, and in course of the next few years the principle has been further amplified by the adoption of a wider scheme and the creation of a military college in India.

By this time, however, the public expectation has wholly outstripped the hesitating concessions. What Indian opinion now wants is a rapid and complete substitution of the British officers of the army by trained Indians, while the military authorities not only believe this to be impracticable but also look upon the scheme of Indianization now being worked out as tentative and experimental. The divergence between the two points of view is thus fundamental, and if the highest military authorities are to be believed, there is no likelihood of the pace of Indianization being quickened in the near future.

Nor have the nationalist efforts been more successful over the other two proposals. The idea of entrusting the defence of India to an Indian minister and of eliminating the British regiments is of course a logical corollary to the transfer of leadership to Indians. It is only by the simultaneous adoption of all these steps that the process of Indianization can be completed. But so far there is not the least sign of the experiment being tried. All that Indian politicians have been able to do about the last two items is to put formal resolutions before the Government, without, however, being able to secure even the recognition of the principle.

But whatever the success of these attempts, there is at least no doubt about their intention. What nationalist

opinion seeks to do about the army is not simply to open up for Indians careers now closed to them, nor even to bring about a reform in matters of detail. Both these are desirable ends but the real object is far more comprehensive. The Indian National Congress wants to transform the whole of the defence service of India from its present to a national footing as one of the indispensable conditions and the natural fulfilment of the ideal of *Swaraj*. The right and capacity of defence is an integral part of self-government. Without it no scheme of local autonomy can be considered to be adequate. The people of India at present do not possess this right of defence, nor are their latent capacities in this respect being properly developed. This must be looked upon as one of the first conditions to be fulfilled if India is ever to become the master of her destiny.

Character of the Present Army

It is perhaps needless to explain that the nationalization of the defence of India will be neither an easy nor a light task. As now constituted, the armed forces under the Government of India are Indian in one sense only—in that their cost is borne by the people of India. In everything else they are either British or, at any rate, non-national, though an overwhelming proportion of their personnel is furnished by India. The main features of the non-national character of the Army in India may be summarized under the following heads:

1. It is not controlled by Indians, and the constitutional representatives of the people of India

in the governmental machinery have no effective voice in its affairs.

2. It is recruited from certain parts of India only and not from the country as a whole. To be more particular, rather more than half of its personnel is furnished by the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province with parts of Kashmir, about a quarter by the hilly tracts of Garhwal, Kumaon and Nepal, and less than a quarter by certain regions of Rajputana, the U. P., Bombay, Madras and Burma. Provinces like Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa and the C. P., and large areas of Madras and Bombay do not furnish a single soldier to the army.
3. Even within the areas from which the army is normally recruited there is a strict regulation of the quotas to be furnished by each district, tribe, caste or sect. Any Punjabi Mussalman or Gurkha cannot claim to be freely admitted to the army simply because he happens to come from one of the two most numerous classes enlisted in the ranks. He must also belong to the specified district, tribe, clan or even *gotra*. In point of fact, the Punjabi Mussalmans in the army are preponderantly trans-Chenab and the Gurkhas, Magars and Gurungs.
4. Not only is the Indian army recruited from a limited number of carefully selected classes from certain specified regions, but its whole

internal organization is based on a caste system more rigid than that of even Hindu society. The Indian army does not recognize the individual. It is neatly grouped into battalions, companies, squadrons, and sometimes even platoons of specified classes according to a fixed ratio, and no one who does not belong to one of these classes is allowed to enter the army simply because he is individually fit. What is more important still, an individual of one class is not permitted to serve in a group allotted to another, and these groups are so arranged that they retain their tribal or communal loyalties and at the same time balance the characteristics and the influence of one another.

5. Indians in the army are kept more or less insulated from the rest of the population, or at least are not encouraged to mix freely with them. The result is mutual suspicion. The soldiers look upon the civil population as a class of inferior beings and the latter return the unfriendly feeling by regarding the soldiers as pampered and arrogant mercenaries.
6. The Army in India is partly constituted of units of the British Army, and till very recently Indians were not employed in all its arms. These two facts taken together made and still make it impossible for Indians in the army to fight a campaign by themselves alone. Ever since the Mutiny it had remained one of the fundamental principles of army organization

in India that not only should Indians not be allowed to occupy positions of responsibility and power in the army, but that they should also never be taken into all its arms so that they might be able, by themselves alone, to constitute a self-contained fighting formation. This traditional policy has been partially abandoned as a result of the decision to give commissions to Indians, to raise a purely Indian regiment of artillery, and to Indianize one of the four divisions of the Field Army. But the transformation, such as it is, is being worked out with extreme caution. It will still take a long time to be accomplished, and even when completed will affect not more than one-twelfth of the total fighting strength of the Army in India. There is also no idea, as has already been said, of eliminating the purely British units of the army.

7. Even now and in spite of the decision to give commissions to Indians and to start a military college in India, the leadership of the army is to all intents and purposes purely British. The British officers in India are technically divided into two classes, those of British Service and those belonging to the Indian Army. For the practical purpose of command, however, there is no distinction between them, and they all belong to the close trade union of British officers of the entire British and Indian armed forces. Politically, these officers are

imbued through and through with the ideals of British imperialism, and their military doctrine is that of the Imperial General Staff. This, of course, is both natural and desirable from the British point of view but it does not on that account make the Indian army more national.

8. Last of all, the function of the Army in India is not purely Indian. It is imperial and not national. Briefly, this means that the Army in India is maintained to uphold British economic and political interests in India and the East and that it may be used against Indians in the interest of British supremacy.

Spirit and Quality of the Army

These characteristics give to the Indian army of today certain qualities of its own. High military authorities are of opinion that as a fighting machine it would be able to stand up to any European army. This may be quite true. But at the same time it is well to remember that, in spite of its efficiency and the fighting quality of its Indian personnel, the Indian army stands in a class apart from the armies of modern civilized States. The most striking of these peculiarities is the absence in it of a national feeling and the patriotism which springs from it. This sense of a national mission has always been recognized as one of the most valuable moral assets of an army. It is, however, wholly absent in the Army in India. Its spirit is purely professional and it has to maintain the fighting quality of its Indian personnel by

basing itself exclusively on either professional pride or hereditary and traditional aptitudes.

It follows from this that the Indian army cannot, like the best armies of modern times, be the expression of the highest military potentiality of the nation. Military energy after all is only a specialized and concentrated form of social energy, and the past history, the habits and traditions, as well as the cultural and political ideals of a people have as much to do with it as purely physical attributes. By its very nature the Indian army cannot draw upon all the elements of strength to be found in the different factors of national life. To that extent its morale is weak, and the British military authorities who are perfectly conscious of the fact try to compensate for the weakness by including purely British units in the fighting formations.

Another peculiarity of the existing army, which is equally conspicuous, is the absence in its Indian portion, due to lack of opportunities, training and education, of all capacity for leadership, organization and initiative on the highest military plane. As a modern fighting machine the Indian army would go to pieces if the British officers were removed from it. The presence of a small number of Indian officers in it has not made any difference in this respect felt as yet, and the role of the Indian element in the army may still be very justly compared to that of stone chips serving as filling in a reinforced concrete building, while the steel frame and nets which give the structure its shape and strength correspond to the British element. It is of course obvious that no other system is possible under the existing circumstances but, as even

Sir Valentine Chirol admitted, the system "however well it works in practice for the production of a reliable fighting machine, was not calculated to train Indians to protect themselves."

Any thoroughgoing programme of Indianizing the army should alter all this. A national army for India should be commanded and controlled by Indians, be recruited from all parts of the country and be animated by a national spirit. It should be a self-contained fighting machine able to do without the help and guidance of foreigners and above all, it should foster the military capacity of the whole nation and be directly related to it. Admittedly this is a far-reaching programme, and British military authorities have never recognized even the remote possibility of its fulfilment. This, however, is hardly unexpected. The military profession is extremely conservative all the world over. Even in free and progressive countries it is non-receptive of new ideas, and in India the soldier's natural distrust of innovation has been immeasurably strengthened by racial and political propensities. Hence, an advocate of army reform in India is likely to be condemned by the military authorities as an unpractical visionary. But, as a British military writer has shrewdly observed, the military mind cannot make a distinction between having vision and being a visionary. If a solution to the problem of Indianizing the army is to be found at all, it will be found through vision, combined with a clear insight into the obstacles existing on our side as well as those likely to be created by extraneous circumstances.

II.—FUNCTION

National And Imperial Function

Of all the aspects in which the Army in India might be made more truly national, function should be dealt with first, because it is vital not only for its own sake but also as a key to the rest of the problem. Every army exists for a definite purpose. It is this purpose which governs the principles of its organization, composition and equipment. If, therefore, an army is to be changed in any important respect, the very first question to ask should be whether there is anything inherent in its function which stands in the way.

Now, were this question to be put to an educated Indian about the existing army, there is not the least doubt what his answer will be. To most Indians the Army in India is an army of occupation, a foreign garrison maintained at the cost of India in order to perpetuate her political subjection to Great Britain. This being so, Indians do not take very seriously the assurances of Government spokesmen about the disinterested purpose of the army, and some of them even go so far in their scepticism as to treat the usual pleas about external aggression and internal troubles as wholly a pretence. Those who hold this view are not at all convinced that the danger to India from the neighbouring powers and border tribes is real, and consequently they find no occasion for surprise if the Government shows an unwillingness to transfer to Indian control an army whose real purpose, as they say, is to suppress the nationalist aspirations of the people of the country.

This, however, is definitely an extreme standpoint and is not based on a correct and comprehensive appreciation of the military stakes involved. Though the Army in India is still the mailed fist behind the British civil administration, a very valuable factor of its political and financial credit and the final sanction of its authority, the holding of India against Indians in the present disarmed state of the country can no longer be regarded as an important military problem. There was indeed a time when the suppression of any possible armed outbreaks on the part of the princes and the people of India was considered to be the principal function of the army. But this role has been obsolescent since the eighties of the last century. It was the Russian menace which pushed it into the background and the steady growth of this danger till the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 induced Lord Kitchener to give to internal security a wholly secondary place in his scheme of reorganization.

Only once between the days of Lord Roberts and the present time did the question of internal security seem to be on the way to regain some of its old importance. This happened between 1912 and 1914 and was due to the fears created by the Swadeshi movement. In 1912 a committee was appointed to report on the strength of the armed forces to be maintained in India. This committee submitted its report the next year and, among other things, expressed the opinion that Lord Kitchener had been too optimistic about the domestic situation in India in relegating internal security to a position of minor importance. It consequently proposed that the strength of the troops assigned to this duty should be increased.

This view was evidently shared by the Government of India, for, when the war broke out, it starved the expeditionary forces sent out of India of their reinforcements for fear of possible complications within the country. This led to the disaster in Mesopotamia, which, in its turn, brought about a complete revolution in the outlook of the Indian military authorities. After the war another committee went afresh into the question of the military requirements of India and assigned to the army functions at once more balanced and more consistent with the strategic demands of the hour.

Under these new principles, the needs of internal security have not been forgotten but they have not been allowed to overshadow or interfere with the other functions of the army. This is perfectly in accord with the latest doctrines of imperial military organization. Unlike the armies of great continental powers, which are meant to provide against a definite military contingency, the armed forces of the British Empire have to be suited to a wide range of circumstances, varying from a world war to a small expedition against an uncivilized tribe or police duties in a city street. Their organization, therefore, is extremely flexible, and, though readily capable of modification and expansion, is suited to average rather than exceptional circumstances. Exactly the same principles have been followed in the post-war reorganization of the Army in India. It is at once a reserve police force, a garrison and a field army, and its war organization has been so devised that it can provide for external defence, border policing and internal security in their due order of importance without any overlapping or clash of duties.

This does not, however, mean that all that British military and civil authorities say about the function of the army is necessarily true. The most important fact about the Army in India is not that it is intended against Indians to the exclusion of defence against external aggression and tribal raids but that, in every one of the functions assigned to it, it is more concerned with British than Indian interests and is thus a considerable addition to the natural defensive requirements of India. Naturally, British writers do not admit this. They argue that the task of defending India is unique and without parallel in the rest of the British Empire, and in support of this opinion point to the immense land frontier of India, to the semi-civilized and warlike tribes living all along it, to the past invasions of India through the north-western passes, to the exposed coast-line, and, last of all, to the racial and religious feuds of the innumerable communities of India. Most of these difficulties are, however, either exaggerated or inapplicable to present-day conditions. Nothing more than a passable familiarity with the problem is necessary to show that the task of defending India has been made materially heavier and more complex under the existing political regime than what it would have been had India been a free country or a Dominion of the British Empire. It is exactly this difference introduced by the British connection which constitutes the injustice of the military burden of India and it can certainly be challenged by Indians as an imperial and not a national liability.

Natural Defensive Requirements of India

We must now try to find out what this difference amounts to in actual practice and in order to do so make a comparison between the natural military requirements of India and those created by the British connection.

The conditions under which every country must be defended are set by three important facts: first, its geographical situation; secondly, its economic needs and political aspirations; and thirdly, its relations with foreign powers as influenced by the two previous considerations. In every one of these respects, India may be considered to hold a peculiarly favourable position. She is, in spite of tendentious assertions to the contrary, one of the best naturally protected countries of the world. Well-defined barriers separate her from her neighbours, and for the most part these are impassable. The military authorities themselves recognize the strength of India's natural defences by considering the whole land frontier from Gilgit to Siam absolutely safe from the military point of view, and by not providing a single battalion of the Regular, Auxiliary or Territorial forces for holding it, with the exception of an unimportant detachment at Gyantse in Tibet, which, however, is stationed there for a wholly different purpose.

In addition, India is insulated from the great Asiatic powers by a wide belt of difficult, sparsely populated and barren country, comprising the deserts of eastern Persia, western Baluchistan and south-western Afghanistan, the mountainous and bleak regions of Sinkiang and Tibet, and the jungles of northern Burma, Indo-China and Siam. The whole of this area is so lacking in natural resources

and means of communication and so extreme in climate that the passage of large bodies of men with modern equipments of war over it would present insuperable difficulties. Even the most modern and powerful aeroplanes would not be able to cross into India over this belt owing to the distance and the atmospheric conditions created by the high altitude, and if one or two specialized machines succeeded in reaching the fringe of the country, they would either be brought down or be utterly incapable of inflicting any material damage.

One has only to compare these conditions with the indeterminate frontiers, with whole countries within air range of one another, between France and Germany, Germany and Poland, Poland and Soviet Russia, Soviet Russia and Manchoukuo, which are nevertheless held against highly organized potential enemies, in order to realize the military advantages possessed by India. Yet this is not the whole of the matter. Just as India is a well-marked geographical unit she can also be a self-contained economic and political unit. Unlike Great Britain, whose prosperity and even existence depend on world-wide commerce and free transport of food from the farthest ends of the earth, India is economically self-sufficient and well able to provide for the material needs of all her population. This self-sufficiency is in fact so complete that even in the present unindustrialized state of the country, a stringent blockade would make no difference to the people of India except a certain lowering of the standard of living. With the country industrially vivified like Soviet Russia they would be in almost an impregnable position.

The military and political need of India is, therefore, to leave and be left well alone, and for this purpose her defensive forces should be just sufficient to act as a deterrent on foreign powers and to destroy in detail any invading army that may reach the borders of India. This last, however, is not likely to be a normal contingency as the difficulty of attacking India by land is too great and the bases from which a naval expedition adequate to conquer India could be sent out are too far away. Besides, the natural political and economic development of all her Asiatic neighbours is in no way affected by India. None of them have any direct point of friction with her which could induce them to seek war, and unless we ourselves excited their cupidity by a culpable display of military weakness they would probably all be perfectly ready to leave us alone.

Three Special Problems

The definition just given of the basic military requirements of India leaves out of account three considerations on which official apologists lay special emphasis. These are the questions of India's relations with Afghanistan and the Pathan tribes and the possibility of an invasion of India through the north-western passes. As regards the last, which figures most in popular imagination, it is often stated that as India has been invaded more than once in the past by warlike peoples from Central Asia, the same thing might be repeated in our days. This, however, is wholly an imaginary fear. It does not require a very profound knowledge of history to discover that a modern irruption of barbarian hordes into India is no longer a practical possibility. The Scythian, Hun,

Turki, Mongol and Tartar invasions of India were caused not by any circumstances on this side of the Hindu Kush, but by ethnological disturbances in the Central Asiatic steppes. The wars of nomadic peoples living in those regions led to the overflow of barbarous and semi-barbarous hordes into the adjoining areas of Russia, China and Persia as well as India. All these countries had to suffer equally from these incursions, and if an exodus of nomadic tribes, such as had taken place in the past, were again to be feared, the countries which would suffer most from them are as likely to be Soviet Russia, China and Persia as India. Yet no one even thinks of putting such a possibility before the General Staffs of these countries and even in India it is never met with except in writings intended for popular propaganda.

The question of Afghanistan and Pathan tribes is of greater practical importance, though even here there has been a good deal of mere specious reasoning. Looked at from a purely defensive point of view, the problem of resisting Afghan aggression is not very difficult. Just as the settling down and civilizing of the nomadic tribes of Turkestan and the expansion of Russia have dried up the very source, so to say, of all widespread ethnographic disturbances in Central Asia, the same historical process has destroyed Afghanistan's importance as a corridor of these invasions. If Afghanistan were to attack India now, it would have to do so with its own solitary strength, and neither its man-power nor its economic resources are such as to make this a real danger to a unified India.

In actual fact, however, it may safely be assumed that Afghanistan has no intention of making